

VOTE - Voter Outreach Through Education Washington Secretary of State

WASHINGTON STATE CURRICULUM GRADES 8-12 STUDENT HANDOUT, LESSON 2

THEME: WHO'S WATCHING THE BALLOT BOX?

Citizens need to know when they go to the bank to deposit hard-earned funds that their investment is safe. Similarly they need to feel confident when they go to their polling place or send their ballot through the mail, that their hard-won right of suffrage is secure. Their investment in democracy needs to be safe and reliable from the registration process, the counting of ballots, and the contents on the ballot, to the certification of the final results.

Washington's Office of the Secretary of State plays a vital and ongoing role in safeguarding and enhancing the quality and reliability of the entire election process. This elected office not only serves as the "watchdog" (guardian) of the procedures and results of elections but also strives continually to make voter registration and voting ever more accessible, reliable and efficient. However, each person also plays a vital role and has the responsibility to help protect the integrity of the electoral process by guarding against fraud during voter registration.

ACTIVITY:

You will be asked to get on the Internet and visit the following sites where you will find some of the safeguards in place for parts of the election process. You will discover that some controversy surrounds one unique feature of Washington's election process.

ONE: THE FINANCING OF CAMPAIGNS IN WASHINGTON STATE

First, go to www.secstate.wa.gov
Click on "Elections and Voting," then on "Campaign Finance Disclosure."

Now, investigate the following:

1. Find and list at least three ways this state attempts to keep the candidates and campaigns accountable to the public and the process safe from undesirable influence.
2. What is the role of the Public Disclosure Commission (PDC) in this effort to maintain voters' confidence in the election system?
3. What is the Internet address for the Public Disclosure Commission?

TWO: PREVENTING ELECTION FRAUD

Navigate to www.secstate.wa.gov
Click on "Register to Vote," then "Voter Information Guide," then select "Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) About Voting and Voter Fraud."

From what you see, answer the following question. Considering the last three questions in the FAQ section, what are three provisions which attempt to ensure that only eligible citizens are registering and voting in Washington State elections?

THREE: THE PRIMARY

Background:

Our Primary system reduces the field of candidates. The remaining candidates will run against each other in the General election.

Did you know there is only one member from each major party on the ballot at the General election? How does this happen? Who decides which candidate gets to represent a political party for each office on the ballot? The voters do through our Primary system. State law dictates that only one candidate from each major party will be listed on the General election ballot.

However, anyone can decide to run for office by filing to be on the ballot and paying a filing fee, which is usually 1% of the salary of that office. Then, in September, voters will see on their ballots all the candidates who filed to run for that office. The voters get to choose one person for each office whom they think should be on the ballot in the General election.

The top vote getter for each party who ran for office on the Primary ballot then gets to advance to the General election ballot. Ironically, many people only vote in General elections because this is the election that ultimately decides which person wins the office. However, notice that by not voting in the Primary, they are missing out on the first chance to determine who will ultimately have a chance to be the final office holder.

So, any eligible citizen can run for election and you, as a voter, are involved in the selection of your elected leaders from the very start of the process. How democratic! Ah, but controversy accompanies this system. In this state, the Primary system is virtually unique, not only in its nature but also in its controversy.

Exploration:

Go to www.secstate.wa.gov. Click on "Elections and Voting," then "Blanket Primary," then select "History of the Blanket Primary" (See note below.)

Read the article with the goal of finding the answers to these questions:

1. In 1907, in this state, what would voters in the Primary have to declare in order to vote?
2. When voters declared, what kind of ballot do you think they would have received in return? Hint: See 1921, the second law passed to enforce this aspect of the Primary in our state's history.
3. In 1934, some citizens objected to the nature of this Primary system. The State Legislators agreed that a change was needed, so in 1935 this state began the nation's first Blanket Primary. After reading the description in quotation marks in the article, describe what Blanket Primary means and how it's different from the 1907 system. Put this answer in your own words.
4. The Democratic and Republican parties objected to this 1935 change all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court. What was the Court's ruling in 1936? Did the Court's ruling in 1980 support or reverse its 1936 decision on the same issue?

Note: If you wish to become more familiar with the alternatives to Washington State's current Primary system, navigate to www.secstate.wa.gov, click on "Elections and Voting," then select "Blanket Primary." Once there, click on "History of the Blanket Primary" and look under "Potential Changes."

Obviously controversy has surrounded our state's unique Primary system for most of the 20th century. It still continues: On March 27, 2002, Federal District Court Judge Franklin D. Burgess ruled Washington's Blanket Primary constitutional. Political parties HAD challenged our primary system in the summer of 2000.

Now that you have taught yourself about this system, it is YOUR turn to suggest what this state should do in its Primary system. At the top of a piece of paper, write: "Should voters be able to choose any candidate on the primary ballot, regardless of the voter's or the candidate's political-party affiliation?"

Below the question, draw a line down the paper, dividing it into two vertical columns, labeling one column "Pro" and the other "Con." On the pro side, list as many arguments as you can for keeping our blanket primary; on the other side, list arguments against it. For each side, consider how our system might impact the election process in terms of its integrity, public acceptance, and level of democracy.

When finished, take your list and move to a small group of two or three other students. Combine your lists into the three to five best arguments for and against a blanket primary. Select a person to record your results. As a group, write a paragraph at the end that summarizes your collective opinion on this issue. Do you think it should be continued? Cite the major reason for your opinion.

Now, combine your group and its results with one other group for a total of about six. Have the two recorders read their results. As one of them records, create a new paper with all the members' names at the top. Make new pro/con lists that reflect the group's choice of the best three defenses for each side on the issue. Also, as a group, discuss your opinions on the blanket primary and then vote. Record the vote and the major reason that led the group to that conclusion. Turn in this group paper.

As a class, announce each group's decision and tally the results.

Note: Additional information and the full text of the Federal Court decision are available by going to www.secstate.wa.gov. Click on "Elections and Voting," then select "Blanket Primary," look under "The Courts/Litigation."